

**Newspaper Coverage of the 1990 Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Campaign**

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*A content analysis of five daily newspapers' coverage of the 1990 Pennsylvania gubernatorial contest revealed that, as hypothesized, the "strategic game," particularly the horse race, was the predominant press theme. Also confirmed were the predictions that a gubernatorial challenger would receive as much coverage as the incumbent but that differences in patterns of incumbent and challenger coverage would appear. The press focused more on the challenger's campaign mistakes and problems and on the incumbent's record and experience. The fact that the challenger was a female and the incumbent a male received little media attention, and there were very few mentions of candidate gender. Differences in coverage patterns among the five papers were also found: the larger papers were more attentive to the campaign, but contrary to expectations were not more attentive to the issues. Issue-oriented coverage was most prominent in the paper published in the state capital.*

As voting patterns in gubernatorial elections have recently become a subject of study in their own right, research has begun to focus on patterns of media coverage in these statewide contests (Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin, 1984; Tidmarch and Karp, 1983; Becker and Fuchs, 1967). But far more is known about the role of the press in presidential and congressional races than in campaigns for the statehouse. To provide additional perspectives on the media in gubernatorial campaigns, this study focuses on newspaper coverage of the 1990 Pennsylvania race between incumbent Democrat Robert Casey and Republican challenger Barbara Hafer.

The Pennsylvania contest provides an opportunity to test several hypotheses drawn from previous analyses of presidential, gubernatorial, and congressional campaigns. The first hypothesis relates to substance of coverage. Studies of press coverage at the local, state, and national levels all find great media emphasis on the "meta-campaign"--press evaluations of how the campaign is going, including candidate strategies and techniques, reactions of supporters, candidate standing in the polls, the mood of the voters, and campaign problems and mistakes. Meta-campaigning consistently receives more attention than do policy issues and candidate attributes (Carey, 1976; Russenello and Wolf, 1979; Patterson, 1980, 1989; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Patterson and Davis, 1985; King, 1990). We therefore predict that the "strategic game" theme will dominate coverage of both candidates, with less coverage devoted to public policy issues and the candidates' personal qualities.

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Research on press coverage of presidential candidates finds relatively equal coverage of challengers and incumbents (Stovall, 1984, 1988; Stempel and Windhauser, 1989). However, such is not the case for coverage of congressional candidates. In both Senate and House races, incumbents tend to receive significantly more attention than do their opponents, with the difference in the amount of incumbent/challenger coverage particularly great in contests for the House of Representatives (Clarke and Evans, 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984; Tidmarch and Karp, 1983). Which pattern applies to coverage of gubernatorial incumbents and challengers? Salmore and Salmore (1989, pp. 205, 212) suggest that because press coverage of gubernatorial campaigns is heavier than that of Senate races, the effects of incumbency in gubernatorial campaigns more closely conform to the pattern of presidential than congressional contests. Thus we hypothesize that coverage of chief executive candidates at the state level will parallel that of the national chief executive rather than national legislators, and that in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial race, the challenger and incumbent will receive relatively equal amounts of press attention.

Previous research on congressional races has also discovered that the content of incumbent coverage differs somewhat from that of challengers (Clarke and Evans, 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984). Incumbent strengths, particularly their experience and previous records, are emphasized, whereas challengers' weaknesses, particularly their organizational and financial problems, garner more press attention (Clarke and Evans, 1983, pp. 60-64; Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984, p. 185). However, in presidential campaigns the general pattern has been for incumbents and challengers not only to receive the same amount of coverage, but also the same type of coverage (Stovall, 1984). But Stovall's (1988) research on the Reagan-Mondale contest provides evidence to suggest that even in presidential campaigns incumbents may receive more favorable coverage than their opponents if the race involves a highly popular incumbent and a weak challenger. Since the 1990 Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign presented a similar situation of a popular incumbent and a weak challenger, we hypothesize that newspaper coverage of the Casey-Hafer campaign will stress the incumbent's strengths and the challenger's weaknesses.

In the 1990 Pennsylvania campaign the incumbent was a male and the challenger a female. Additionally, the incumbent was well-known for his anti-abortion views while the challenger adopted a strong pro-abortion position. This situation created the potential for the gender difference between the candidates to emerge as an issue in the campaign. Is the potential gender issue addressed by the media? Would the media explicitly and frequently refer to Casey as the male candidate and Hafer as the female candidate in their coverage of the candidates' personal attributes? Although previous research does not provide an answer to this question, we predict that the press will avoid the issue of gender and concentrate instead on other background attributes of the candidates. This hypothesis does not

suggest that gender would not be a factor in the campaign, but only that the media will be reluctant explicitly to discuss the gender difference between the candidates for two reasons. First, the fact that one candidate was male and the other female was self-evident and therefore the media would feel no need to point out the obvious. Second, discussion of the gender issue could potentially raise questions concerning the media's fairness and objectivity toward the candidates.

Finally, there is evidence from many studies that press coverage varies according to media size (or circulation) and prestige (King, 1990; Patterson, 1980; Buell, 1987). This study is limited to newspaper coverage, but we predict that the larger, more prestigious dailies will provide more campaign coverage in general, more coverage of policy issues, and more equal coverage of the two candidates than the smaller papers. These hypotheses are based on the assumption that the larger papers will have access to more resources and staff (including reporters based at the state capital) which will be reflected in better balanced and more extensive coverage of the campaign than the smaller papers.

## Method

All Monday through Saturday gubernatorial campaign news coverage from five Pennsylvania daily newspapers--the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Scranton Tribune*, the *Harrisburg Patriot*, and the *Erie Morning News*--was content analyzed from October 2, 1990 to November 6, 1990, the five-week period preceding the election.<sup>1</sup> The newspapers were selected both for their location within the state and their circulation. All geographical areas of the state are represented, as is diversity in size of readership.<sup>2</sup>

The thematic content of all five papers which spoke to the campaign during the five-week time frame was analyzed, with the exception of editorials and letters to the editors. An article was included in the study if its title specifically mentioned either Casey or Hafer or the words "gubernatorial election" or "campaign." Because most stories contained numerous themes and many mentioned both candidates, the unit of analysis was the paragraph. If a paragraph mentioned more than one theme, it was coded under all relevant thematic categories. Separate tabulations were made for each candidate to permit comparison of their patterns of coverage. Neutral references--i.e., those that did not refer specifically to either candidate--were excluded from this study. Two coders performed the analysis, and their level of intercoder agreement was 93%.

Three thematic categories were employed: "meta-campaign," "policy issues," and "personal qualities." To be included under the category of "meta-campaign," a paragraph had to deal with the campaign as a strategic contest. Seven subcategories were identified: horse race (poll results and other discussions of who was ahead or behind); activities of the candidates and/or their campaign organizations; activities of party leaders and/or party organizations; the mood of

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the voters; campaign problems or mistakes; commentary on TV ads, debates, or other TV coverage; and disputes between the two candidates.

For a paragraph to be coded under "policy issues," it had to include a policy statement either by a candidate or one about the candidate's policy position. Seven policy subcategories were included: abortion, budget and taxes, environment, education, automobile insurance, the Philadelphia fiscal crisis, and other. The policy areas identified in this study are issues which reflect the state news agenda. Previous research on gubernatorial campaigns indicates that the national news agenda seldom is a component of the media's coverage of gubernatorial races (Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin, 1984, p. 1239). The issues which dominate the media's coverage of gubernatorial campaigns tend to include policy areas where state government exercises some authority and control.

The category of "personal qualities" included all paragraphs which referred to the candidates' gender, image and/or style, record and/or qualifications, personal and/or family background, and status as the incumbent or challenger. The subcategory of gender enabled us to measure the frequency of media reference to the gender difference between the candidates.

## Results

As predicted by the first hypothesis, the theme of the meta-campaign received more total coverage than did the other two thematic categories (see Table 1). Whereas the campaign as a strategic contest was mentioned in 55.6% of the candidates' combined coverage, policy issues appeared in only 22.7% and personal qualities in 21.7%. But some significant differences in distribution of thematic coverage of the two candidates did appear. Although Casey and Hafer had almost identical percentages of issue coverage (23.4% and 22%, respectively), Hafer, the challenger, received significantly more meta-campaign coverage and significantly less coverage of personal qualities than did the incumbent, Casey. Almost 63% of Hafer's total coverage was devoted to the meta-campaign and only 15% to personal attributes, whereas 48% of Casey's total coverage dealt with the strategic game and almost 29% with personal characteristics (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Paragraphs by Candidate and Theme

	meta-campaign		policy issues		personal qualities		total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Casey	571	(48%)	279	(23.4%)	340	(28.6%)	1190
Hafer	<u>774</u>	(62.9%)	<u>271</u>	(22%)	<u>185</u>	(15%)	<u>1230</u>
	1345	(55.6%)	550	(22.7%)	525	(21.7%)	2420

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For both candidates, the press devoted more attention to the horse race subcategory of the meta-campaign than to any other theme in this study (see Table 2). An almost identical number of paragraphs focused on handicapping the race for each candidate (285 for Hafer and 282 for Casey). Poll results and other analyses of who was ahead and who was behind accounted for 36.8% of Hafer's meta-campaign coverage and 49.4% of Casey's (see Table 2).

Although the meta-campaign, particularly the horse race, was the predominant press theme, public policy issues were covered by the newspapers. As

Table 2. Distribution of Paragraphs by Candidate and Thematic Subcategory

	<u>Meta-campaign</u>			
	<u>Casey</u>		<u>Hafer</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Horse race	282	(49.4%)	285	(36.8%)
Party activities	16	(2.8%)	25	(3.2%)
Mood of voters	6	(1.0%)	7	(0.9%)
Campaign problems	24	(4.2%)	144	(18.6%)
TV coverage	42	(7.4%)	86	(11.1%)
Candidate activities	132	(23.1%)	99	(12.8%)
Phila. loans dispute	<u>69</u>	(12.1%)	<u>128</u>	(16.5%)
	571	(100%)	774	(100%)
	<u>Policy Issues</u>			
	<u>Casey</u>		<u>Hafer</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Abortion	41	(14.7%)	61	(22.5%)
Taxes, budget	93	(33.3%)	89	(32.8%)
Environment	33	(11.8%)	20	(7.4%)
Education	20	(7.2%)	21	(7.7%)
Philadelphia	24	(8.6%)	23	(8.5%)
Auto insurance	35	(12.5%)	14	(5.2%)
Other	<u>33</u>	(11.8%)	<u>43</u>	(15.9%)
	279	(100%)	271	(100%)
	<u>Personal Qualities</u>			
	<u>Casey</u>		<u>Hafer</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Gender	5	(1.5%)	24	(13.0%)
Image/style	81	(23.8%)	78	(42.2%)
Record/experience	148	(43.5%)	16	(8.6%)
Personal/family history	70	(20.6%)	27	(14.6%)
Challenger/incumbent	35	(10.3%)	35	(18.9%)
Other	<u>1</u>	(0.3%)	<u>5</u>	(2.7%)
	340	(100%)	185	(100%)

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Table 3 indicates, both candidates received almost equal amounts of policy issue coverage (279 paragraphs for Casey and 271 for Hafer), with patterns of issue coverage also showing some similarity. For both Casey and Hafer, state taxes and the budget received the greatest emphasis (about one-third of each candidate's total issue coverage), with the issue of abortion coming in second for both.

The second hypothesis, that the challenger would receive about as much press attention as the incumbent, was confirmed. The incumbent, in fact, got slightly less newspaper attention than did the challenger: the Casey campaign was the subject of 1190 paragraphs in the five newspapers, whereas Hafer was discussed in 1230 (see Table 1). Concerning their personal qualities, the press also tended not to explicitly discuss either candidate's status as the challenger or incumbent. The number of paragraphs making reference to Hafer as the challenger or Casey as the incumbent was small but identical (35 for each; see Table 2).

Table 3. Distribution of Paragraphs by Candidate and Themes of Campaign Problems and Political Experience

	Casey		Hafer		Totals
	N	%	N	%	
Campaign problems/mistakes	24	(14.3%)	144	(85.7%)	168
Political record/experience	148	(90.2%)	16	(9.8%)	164
	172	(51.8%)	160	(48.2%)	332

As predicted in the third hypothesis, there were some major differences in patterns of coverage of incumbent and challenger, particularly with regard to the subcategories of campaign problems and previous political experience. Although the total amount of coverage devoted to both candidates' campaign problems and previous experience was almost identical (168 paragraphs dealt with the former theme, and 164 discussed the latter), divergences in pattern for each candidate were extreme. The press devoted significantly more attention to the challenger's campaign mistakes and problems and significantly less to her political record and experience than the incumbent's, while the reverse was true for the incumbent (see Table 3). In addition, as Table 2 shows, over twice as many paragraphs made reference to Casey's personal and family history as to Hafer's (70 and 27 paragraphs, respectively).

The gender issue, as hypothesized, received very little press attention in the 1990 Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign. Only five paragraphs from all the newspapers explicitly discussed Casey's gender, and only 24 mentioned Hafer's (see Table 2). Although the female candidate received more gender mentions than

did the male, the total number of paragraphs focusing on this subcategory of candidate personal qualities was miniscule. The personal characteristic most mentioned for Casey was political record and experience (148 paragraphs); for Hafer it was image and style (78 paragraphs).

Table 4. Distribution of Paragraphs by Candidate, Newspaper, and Theme

	<u>meta-campaign</u>		<u>Casey</u> <u>policy</u> <u>issues</u>		<u>personal</u> <u>qualities</u>		<u>totals</u>
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
	Philadelphia	196	(54.1%)	78	(21.5%)	88	
Pittsburgh	163	(57.6%)	62	(21.9%)	58	(20.5%)	283
Harrisburg	51	(27.4%)	85	(45.7%)	50	(26.9%)	186
Scranton	87	(49.2%)	27	(15.2%)	63	(35.6%)	177
Erie	74	(40.7%)	27	(14.8%)	81	(44.5%)	182

  

	<u>meta-campaign</u>		<u>Hafer</u> <u>policy</u> <u>issues</u>		<u>personal</u> <u>qualities</u>		<u>totals</u>
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
	Philadelphia	215	(58.7%)	75	(20.5%)	76	
Pittsburgh	276	(83.4%)	28	(8.5%)	27	(8.2%)	331
Harrisburg	130	(49.6%)	94	(35.9%)	38	(14.5%)	262
Scranton	80	(62.0%)	30	(23.3%)	19	(14.7%)	129
Erie	73	(51.4%)	44	(31.0%)	25	(17.6%)	142

The final hypotheses in this study related to expected differences in coverage according to newspaper prestige and size (or circulation). As predicted,

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the largest and most prestigious papers, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, devoted more attention to the campaign than did the smaller dailies. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the only newspaper sampled which is considered to be a member of the "prestige press," had the greatest number of articles devoted to the campaign (51). The *Pittsburgh-Post-Gazette* was second with 35 articles, and the Harrisburg, Scranton and Erie papers had 27, 23, and 24 articles respectively. The prestigious *Philadelphia Inquirer*, as predicted, was almost equally attentive to the two candidates, with Casey mentioned in 362 paragraphs and Hafer in 366. But the other four papers showed a greater discrepancy in amount of coverage, with the Pittsburgh and Harrisburg papers devoting more space to Hafer and the two others devoting more to Casey (see Table 4). This discrepancy in amount of coverage does not appear to be attributable to political partisanship by the papers. All five papers editorially endorsed Casey's re-election bid. However, this is not to say that individual papers did not exhibit signs of bias. For example, the Scranton *Tribune* (Casey's hometown newspaper) ran six photographs of Casey to accompany news articles during the five-week period but none of Hafer.

The hypothesis that the larger, more prestigious papers would be more attentive to the issues than the smaller dailies was not confirmed. The *Harrisburg Patriot*, published in the state capital, contained more paragraphs devoted to both candidates' policy issues than did either the Philadelphia or Pittsburgh papers. The *Patriot* mentioned Casey's policy issues in 85 paragraphs and Hafer's in 94; the comparable figures for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* are 78 and 75 paragraphs, respectively, and for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 62 and 28 paragraphs, respectively (see Table 4). Both the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh papers devoted over half of their coverage of each candidate to the meta-campaign (a whopping 83% of the *Post-Gazette's* coverage of Hafer focused on the meta-campaign); of all the newspapers studied, the Harrisburg paper was the least attentive to both candidates' strategic contest and most attentive to their policy issues.

One final area concerns the relative importance of campaign news compared to other news stories. In other words, how "newsworthy" was the campaign for each newspaper? Part of the answer to this question is provided by the number of news articles on the campaign which each newspaper ran (Table 4). However, total number of news articles about the campaign is also a function of both the newspaper's priorities and its resources and staff size. Thus one would expect the large papers to carry more articles because of these factors. Another indication of the relative importance of the campaign is suggested by the proportion of campaign articles placed on the front page, and on this indicator, the five papers varied considerably. The paper with the fewest front page campaign articles was the largest: the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which had only 8% of its campaign articles on the front page. The smallest, the *Erie Morning News*, led all the other papers with 42% of its campaign articles on the front page. The



Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and Scranton papers had 26%, 31%, and 22% of their campaign articles on the front page, respectively.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Among the most significant findings in this study was that even though the contest was very lopsided from the beginning (Casey remained far ahead in all the polls conducted during the summer and fall of 1990 and won the election by a landslide), the press still focused more on the theme of the horse race and other facets of the campaign as a strategic contest than on policy issues and the candidates' personal qualities and qualifications. Media fascination with handicapping the race has been found in numerous studies of presidential primaries and general election campaigns; it holds true also for this very one-sided gubernatorial race. The only newspaper to devote more attention to policy issues than to the meta-campaign was published in the state capital, while even the state's most prestigious newspaper addressed the meta-campaign more than issues of public policy.

Evidence from the 1990 Casey-Hafer campaign also suggests that certain patterns of gubernatorial coverage parallel those found in presidential campaigns, while other patterns of press coverage follow those found in congressional campaigns. The large discrepancy between the amount of coverage granted to incumbents and challengers noted in congressional campaigns does not seem to be followed in this case of coverage of a state chief executive campaign. The evidence from this study and from research on presidential campaigns suggests that incumbents and challengers in chief executive contests seem to garner relatively equal amounts of coverage, particularly in the prestige press, regardless of how lopsided the race may be. But equal amount of coverage is not the same as equal distribution of coverage. This study confirms previous congressional-level (as well as lopsided presidential) findings that incumbents have an advantage, as the press is more likely to focus on the incumbent's strengths and the challenger's weaknesses than the reverse. The reality of the Pennsylvania campaign was that Hafer did have many campaign problems and weaknesses including an unexpected and difficult challenge in the primary as well as poor organization and financial problems in the general election. But she also had a strong political background and substantial previous experience. These latter characteristics were virtually ignored by the newspapers, whereas Casey's record and experience got a lot of play in all five papers.

The findings of this study suggest a number of implications concerning the role of the press in gubernatorial campaigns. First, although the press gave greater emphasis to the meta-campaign aspects of the race, policy issues were covered and that coverage reflected the issue priorities of the candidates. The Hafer campaign clearly centered its message on the issues of abortion, the budget and

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taxes. At the same time, the Casey campaign emphasized the fiscal soundness of state government and the health of the economy. These were the issues which received the greatest coverage by the press. In other words, the candidates were successful in defining the substantive issues of the campaign which received media attention. However, a second conclusion this study suggests is that even though the challenger was successful using the free media to articulate her policy positions, Casey enjoyed certain advantages deriving from incumbency which resulted in more favorable press coverage. Incumbents and challengers are not treated the same by the press in contests for governor. To be sure, the mistakes and problems of the Hafer campaign also played a role in contributing to her electoral defeat, but Hafer's mistakes do not account for the greater press attention to Casey's background and political experience.

Finally, this study provides evidence to support the conclusion that newspapers in Pennsylvania are significantly diverse in the pattern of coverage they provide in gubernatorial campaigns. Variation in coverage stems from many factors. The list of variables would include circulation, geographical location, commitment and number of reporters, and partisanship. As a consequence, the newspapers used in this study varied in the amount, type, and quality of coverage they provided of the campaign.

Press portrayal of the gender issue remains a topic for further research. Does the pattern of press avoidance of the discussion of candidate gender occur in other statewide chief executive-level contests? In 1990, female gubernatorial candidates ran against males in several large states, and comparative analyses of their treatment by the media need to be undertaken. From this study we cannot judge the extent to which patterns of press coverage were the result of incumbency, the lopsided nature of the contest, and other factors which research suggests influence press coverage, or whether these patterns were also influenced by the gender difference between the candidates. Nevertheless, the lack of press interest in this aspect of the campaign alone was an interesting feature of press coverage of the Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign.

Variation in patterns of gubernatorial coverage by the different media also warrants further examination. For example, is the Pennsylvania finding that the newspaper based in the state capital focuses more on policy issues than even the prestige press a generalizable one?<sup>3</sup> And much comparative data are still needed about how the media in different states portray gubernatorial candidates. Only with additional research can we determine whether the patterns discovered in this study about press coverage of the Casey-Hafer contest are typical of gubernatorial coverage in general.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of

the Pennsylvania Political Science Association, Carlisle, PA, April 12, 1991. The authors wish to thank Bruce Andrews and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

1. Two methodological issues arose which require some explanation. These are the selection of the five-week period preceding the election as the time frame for analysis and the exclusion of the Sunday editions of the newspapers from the data set. The appropriate time period for analyzing press coverage of campaigns is a matter of scholarly disagreement. Some scholars consider the entire period from Labor Day to election day as the traditional campaign beginning and ending dates (see, for example, Stovall, 1984, 1988; Stempel and Windhauser, 1989). Other scholars, however, focus only on the four to five week period preceding the election (Tidmarch and Karp, 1983; Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin, 1984; Carey, 1976; Russenello and Wolf, 1976), as they consider the last four to five weeks of the campaign to coincide with the peak period of media interest and coverage. An examination of the five newspapers used in this study revealed that it was only in the last five weeks of the campaign that substantial coverage began to occur. Thus, only the data from the last five weeks of the campaign were analyzed for this study.

The Sunday editions of the various papers were omitted to preserve comparability of the findings. One of the newspapers (the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) does not publish a Sunday edition, while others (the *Erie Morning News* and the *Harrisburg Patriot*) publish a joint Sunday edition with the local evening daily. Thus the absence of one Sunday edition and the lack of comparability among the rest precluded the inclusion of the Sunday editions for analysis.

2. As of 1989, the Philadelphia Inquirer had a circulation of 508,496; the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*'s circulation was 168,144; the *Harrisburg Patriot* had a circulation of 50,425; the *Scranton Tribune* a circulation of 37,935; and the *Erie Morning News* a circulation of 28,355 (Boyden, 1989).
3. One of the authors of this study contacted William Yingling, a reporter for the *Harrisburg Patriot*, to discuss the distinctive pattern of coverage given to the campaign by that newspaper. Mr. Yingling suggested two possible explanations. The first centered on the location of the newspaper in the state capital which results in an environment where the reporters are more knowledgeable about state issues and also consider state politics to be their natural focus. Second, Mr. Yingling indicated that the reporters at the Patriot had made a commitment to provide substantive coverage of this particular campaign. What this study can not determine is whether, in the absence of such a commitment, the location of a newspaper in the state capital is sufficient to generate distinctive coverage of gubernatorial elections.

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